
The Paterson Strike

by Patrick L. Quinlan

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I had intended at the beginning of the Paterson silk strike to write a daily bulletin of the situation, but unfortunately for my good intentions and plans the chief of police, [John] Bimson by name, put the writer, Carlo Tresca, and Miss [Elizabeth Gurley] Flynn in jail on the charge of “inciting to riot.” As I was in the county prison for four days, and all the while the strike was growing, and has since I was released continued to grow like wild-fire, I am unable to catch up with the fight.

To put it briefly, the strike was not general until Tuesday, Feb. 25 [1913], and up to that time the fight was limited to one factory, the Doherty mill. The cause of the dispute being Doherty’s attempt to introduce the three- and four-loom system instead of the two-loom, as was customary. The Doherty workers had been on strike for more than a month. Three weeks ago the workers themselves saw that if Doherty succeeded in installing the three- and four-loom system it would be generally introduced throughout the silk industry.

Mass meetings were held, the situation from every angle and viewpoint was discussed and, after due consideration as to the responsibilities and risks involved, a general strike was called. Of course other grievances, such as hours, time, and pay, were taken into account, and the whole carefully, carefully crystalized by [Adolph] Lessig and [Frederick] Koettgen and the strike committee into a preamble and a list of demands for the workers, the public, and, above all, the boss manufacturers. The strike was then speedily licked into shape.

At first the response was dubious, but the arrest of Tresca, Quinlan, and Flynn seemed to be a challenge that the workers instinctively saw and knew should be accepted. And while Flynn and Tresca were in jail but one and two days respectively, the strike fever began to grow, the enthusiasm for a battle with the bosses once more began to gather like a whirlwind and swept all before it like grace through a camp meeting until every silk worker in Paterson feels that in order to be save he must go to the industrial union and, fortunately, this time there is no doubt as to who, which, and what only the one union — the IWW of Chicago.

In the beginning a diabolical attempt to revive the Katz ghost was made by the capitalistic press. Talks of violence, civilized methods, out of town agitators, direct action, etc., were heard and read, but the corpse could not be galvanized into life.

Every day the workers of all crafts, all ages and of both sexes, are leaving the mills, big and little, to the tune of an average of 1,200 a day. All told now there must be about 25,000 out on strike. And here it must be said not a man, woman, nor child was coerced, the capitalists' press misrepresentations, calumny, and slander to the contrary.

Apart from the splendid solidarity, and it is truly inspiring; apart from the complete burial of all race and religious differences, one noteworthy but unintentional object has been accomplished: The middle class is brought to its knees. It is terrified and helpless. The storekeepers are no longer propagandists for the bosses. They are neutral.

Once more, before I close this hasty and incomplete survey let me refer to the city officials and the police. At first, midst much brag and bluster, they started to eat us alive; to clean out the agitators; to deliver Paterson and the weavers over to the silk capitalists. So, armed cap-a-pie,¹ booted and spurred, clubs raised, teeth clenched, and general appearance terrible to behold, the police surrounded the halls, read the Riot Act within, drove right and left, made much sound and fury, got patted on the backs, etc., lauded to the skies, but the strike continued to grow. So they crawled like skunks into their holes and said: "What's the use?"

P. L. Quinlan.

Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport

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¹ That is, from head to foot.